

INDEX TO CINEASTE, VOL. XIX

Compiled by Susan Ohmer

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flux of urban life (and a cheating pedicab driver), she encounters an unflinchingly helpful bureaucracy, including the director of the city PSB, who appears as if out of a socialist utopia to provide Qiu Ju with rides and meals (a certain slippage also appears here when the English subtitles change the name Public Security Bureau to Public Service Bureau). Qiu Ju's implacable quest is also leavened by her companion, sister-in-law Meizi, portrayed by a nonprofessional; in one scene, while Qiu Ju's lawyer is explaining the legal system over a take-out lunch, the sister is baffled not so much by the law as by a can of Sprite cola she studies, turns, and spills, before figuring out how to drink from it.

Inevitably, Qiu Ju's efforts begin to backfire. Her husband, recovering, grows cross over the neighbors' gossip and the implied challenge to his patriarchal authority. The state's investigation takes on a life of its own, out of her control. Her pregnancy suddenly goes badly, and late at night Wan Qinglai must seek the help of the Chief, who responds, "You remember me when there's trouble." But Wang gets out of bed and organizes a squad of men to carry Qiu Ju on a stretcher across the countryside to a hospital, where her life is saved and her baby—a boy—is born.

Qiu Ju now wants to bury the hatchet with Wang Shantang. The state, however, has insisted on X-raying her husband, and discovers that a rib had been broken through the Chief's kicks. It has become a criminal matter. While the Wan family celebrates its new child with a feast, a police siren sounds across the farming valley—an ominous signifier of a part of the state apparatus the film leaves invisible. Qiu Ju, now more recognizably the glamorous Gong Li, in an orange cap with a bright flowery jacket, rushes from the party out on the road toward Wang's. Qiu Ju is physically more mobile than we have ever seen her before, but the film freezes her motion in its final shot, showing her face in close-up—hatless, beautiful, clearly troubled.

Zhang Yimou has been well contented to accept the views of American and European reviewers that *The Story of Qiu Ju* is 'universal' and 'timeless' in its depiction of human nature. It may be all of that, but it is also particular to a time and a place and especially to a select audience: China's bureaucrats. From all accounts, it has pleased them also, and why not, with its portrait of a bureaucracy that is accountable when it errs and grows more generous and benign at each rung up the ladder. For spectators who are neither Chinese nor bureaucrats, and, unlike most film reviewers, unsure about the universality and timelessness of human nature, *The Story of Qiu Ju* is a hearty though slightly withholding embrace of quotidian China, initiated by its director for complex reasons, that outsiders are invited to share.—Robert Sklar